

Environmental Management Systems and Sustainable Federal Operations

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Since Executive Order 13148, “Greening the Government Through Leadership in Environmental Management,” was issued in April 2000, Federal agencies have been moving forward with the implementation of environmental management systems (EMSs) in ways consistent with their respective mission requirements. As a whole, the Federal government has learned much about EMS, but one concept has risen to the top in terms of relevance to Federal agency leaders: an EMS that is effectively implemented and properly used can provide benefits in terms of both mission and environmental performance.

The concept of improving the mission and environmental performance of Federal agencies is entirely consistent with Administration priorities, as reflected in the following quote from the President’s Message in the FY2002 President’s Management Agenda:

“In the long run, there are few items more urgent than ensuring that the Federal government is well run and results-oriented. This Administration is dedicated to ensuring that the resources entrusted to the Federal government are well managed and wisely used. We owe that much to the American people.”

This quote clearly links the concepts of Federal agency performance and effective management of resources. An equally important concept that is not evident in the above quote, but is nevertheless integral to the President’s Management Agenda, is that Federal agencies are expected to accomplish their respective missions successfully for many years to come. If we are to meet this expectation, we must work to achieve “Sustainable Federal Operations,” or more generally, Sustainable Operations.

Because of the various interpretations of the term “sustainable” or “sustainability,” it is important to clarify what we’re really talking about when we refer to “sustainable operations.” For the purpose of this article, Sustainable Operations are operations conducted in a manner that preserves the resources (e.g., human resources, natural resources, man-made resources-facilities, equipment, financial, and community support) that are necessary to conduct successful mission operations indefinitely into the future. Since the concept of sustainable operations has a long-term focus, a

sustainability
initiative must
consider

not only a current mission, but reasonably anticipated future mission requirements. Significantly, the management focus in a sustainability initiative is not compliance; rather, it is the implementation of actions to prevent resource depletion or degradation greater than of the capacities of natural, human and man-made systems to recover fully on a time scale consistent with mission-driven resource demands.

A number of Federal facilities have undertaken sustainability initiatives. These initiatives are on-going in conjunction with governmentwide EMS implementation activities under E.O. 13148.

The concurrent execution of sustainability initiatives and EMS implementation activities has generated considerable discussion (and some confusion) regarding their inter-relationships.

The purpose of this article is to shed

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some light on this issue. Put very simply, achieving sustainable Federal operations is a long-term undertaking with many underlying goals.

The EMS is a tool to provide the consistency of management structure and organizational purpose and direction to achieve these goals, over time, through a continual improvement process. For example, both Fort Lewis and Fort Bragg have sustainability initiatives that include 25-year sustainability goals developed with input from regional stakeholders. These installations also developed intermediate, five-year objectives to support each of the sustainability goals. Both installations are using the management system structure as a means to obtain the long-term strategic goals.

Whether a facility chooses to refer to their management system as an EMS or a "Sustainability Management System" (SMS), it is the management system that provides the framework necessary to achieve long-term sustainability goals. Sustainability goals often contribute to economic and social progress, as well as environmental performance. They may incorporate concepts of life cycle management or industrial ecology. Goals of this scope and magnitude can be achieved, however, through a series of small, planned, incremental steps over a longer period of time. The long-term attainment of strategic goals requires well-structured management that provides consistency of purpose and direction, a continual improvement process, and teamwork across the organization (not limited to the "environmental shop"). A well-designed and implemented EMS provides a framework in which an organization can develop and effectively employ these management attributes.

A management system based on the framework of ISO 14001 provides for or enables:

- Leadership involvement: When it's important to the leadership, things get done.
- Identification, within all operational areas, of opportunities for improvement relevant to sustainability goals.
- Logical and objective prioritization of opportunities to improve mission and environmental performance.

- Setting and maintenance of objectives and targets responsive to current mission priorities as well as long-term sustainability goals.
- Definition of roles, responsibilities, and management structure: What actions need to be taken, and by whom, to achieve targets, objectives and goals.
- Placement of accountability for operational control in the hands of those with direct authority over operational practices.
- Worker-level awareness of the environmental impacts of daily operations.
- Teamwork approach to achieving sustainability goals: Mobilization of employees to control mission activities in a manner conducive to attainment of targets, objectives, and sustainability goals.
- Improved communication (internal and external).
- Focus on mission activities versus compliance requirements.
- Use of measurement to gauge progress towards goals.

Continual improvement

The list above is not intended to be a comprehensive set of the elements or attributes of a management system; rather, it is designed to highlight some select elements of the EMS relevant to attaining the long-term goals inherent to Federal sustainability initiatives.

Additionally, the integration of external stakeholders and involvement of local communities in the EMS is instrumental in ensuring meaningful and equitable participation. An organization must reach out and develop more effective partnerships and improved relationships with the community to attain a cooperative approach to sustainability beyond an organization's own borders.

But in the end, the success of using an EMS to achieve sustainable operations hinges on the importance of linking the performance objectives of the EMS to the larger goals of sustainable operations. These performance objectives are then in turn supported by all the other EMS elements. In this way, the EMS structure ensures future success and the achievement of environmental performance, and sustainable operations for Federal facilities over the long term. ■

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